

LIVINGSTON EAST AREA PLAN

Summary of Stakeholder Interview Responses Interviews Conducted March and April 2008

“Preliminary Community Outreach” is an important part of the initial phase of the process to develop an area plan for the Livingston East portion of the city of Columbus. During March and April 2008, staff of the city’s Planning Division interviewed twelve stakeholders representing the Livingston East planning area in eleven interviews in order to help understand a variety of the “human” perspectives of some of those persons who know the area best. Stakeholders are persons with personal, business, or other strong interest(s) in the present and future of the community.

Below is a general summary of responses to twenty-one interview questions that focus on the topic areas of physical attributes of the community, transportation, community facilities, and economic development.

Please note that, during the year-long planning process, additional issues almost certainly will arise and will be addressed within the plan’s interim and final products. The stakeholder interviews simply provide a snapshot to help staff perceive and prepare to help address many of the existing conditions and dynamics thought to be at play within the planning area.

There will be many other opportunities for the public to raise additional issues and to recommend approaches to address them in satisfactory ways.

Staff has incorporated below all interview responses whether they can be addressed by a physical development plan with a ten-year horizon or not. Some operational areas, such as law and code enforcement, are beyond the scope of an area plan. Plans address land use, urban design, transportation, and other appropriate planning and development topics.

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES

- **What are the characteristics, places, or things about your neighborhood that you most cherish?**

Interviewees generally had much to offer in response to this question. They generally understood the value of an area plan but felt that the area already has many assets on which to build. Frequently mentioned were the excellent location near downtown, Port Columbus, and freeways; proud, friendly, helpful, and cooperative people ; cultural diversity; well-built homes; good access to public transportation; mature trees, other vegetation, and parks; community facilities such as Barnett Recreation Center and the spray park; good fire/emergency medical service (EMS) response times;

relatively new infrastructure (including sewers and streetlights); close proximity to retail filling day-to-day needs and office business establishments; good relationships between neighborhoods and schools; and neighborhood churches.

- **What are the characteristics, places, or things about your neighborhood that you would most like to see change?**

Most important were (a) crime/public safety issues including burglaries, gangs, speeding, litter, excessive noise, panhandling, and vandalism; and (b) the deterioration and lack of maintenance of residential, business, and public properties. Many responses also focused on poor relationships between property owners and renters; foreclosures and vacant homes; missing or damaged streetlights, curbs, and sidewalks; public schools; the general lack of things for young people to do during their free time; the uninviting pedestrian environment; neighborhood complacency and lack of a sense of community; transient persons; and the need for sound walls between residential neighborhoods and the freeways, notably I-70 and I-270.

- **What are the issues facing your neighborhood?**

In addition to those mentioned above were the aging housing stock, racial change, the cost of living for persons on fixed incomes, a lack of retail options, potholes, and city services -- with a perceived lack of coordination between city divisions and departments.

- **What are the opportunities of which your neighborhood could take advantage?**

Many were mentioned, including smart/"green"/efficient rejuvenation of the area, the many valuable services of the Far East Neighborhood Pride Community Center and the two recreation centers, the area's many other public and private facilities and institutions, small businesses, partnerships with the United Way of Central Ohio, single-floor homes for the aging population, the city's Home Again and Neighborhood Pride! programs, and the area planning process now underway.

- **What is your particular vision for your neighborhood over the next five or ten years? (Or, tell me what your neighborhood is like in the next five or ten years if your vision were to occur?)**

Most envisioned elements of a vibrant, cooperative, inviting neighborhood for families and young children. Generally, perhaps of greatest importance, is a more aesthetically-pleasing, well-maintained area about which residents, businesspersons, and others would be very proud. Apartment complexes with responsible ownership and management and fewer residential foreclosures were stressed. Also included were playgrounds and well-maintained parks and other open spaces, more homeownership and a good supply of affordable "starter" homes, a mixed-use community center for teens and others, expanding businesses that not only serve the area but also draw people from outside, a strong police presence, and enhanced neighborhood communication and cooperation.

- **Have you noticed changes taking place in your neighborhood or area in the recent past? If so, what have you noticed? Why do you think these changes are taking place?**

Some of these changes have been discussed above. In addition, they include increases in the following: crime (especially property crimes, drugs, and speeding), renters and subsidized housing, older residents, younger families, retail and residential vacancies/foreclosures, and homes and businesses lacking regular maintenance.

Interestingly, property values were seen as both increasing and as decreasing, depending on the respondent. Some have observed a loss of shade trees and other vegetation and at least one person felt that the police presence has improved significantly within the last year or so.

- **Are there any specific locations in your neighborhood or area where you can see a real great opportunity to make improvements in the future?**

Most respondents mentioned roadway intersections, including (in no particular order) Livingston Avenue at James Road, Hamilton Road, Country Club Road, and Lattimer Drive; while others cited Livingston Avenue between James and Zettler roads or “problem intersections all along Livingston Avenue”. The intersections of Bexvie Avenue and Zettler Road and Barnett Road and James Road were cited as well. Also, the resurfacing of Manfeld Drive, more trees throughout the area, and the Livingston Court shopping center were offered as improvement opportunities.

At least one respondent cited apartment complexes adjacent to his/her/their single-family neighborhood as improvement opportunities.

- **Overall, how would you rate the appearance of your neighborhood or area on a scale from one to ten, with ten being the best? Why that rating?**

Ratings ranged from a high of ten (10) to a low of two (2) with an average rating of 6.4. All respondents focused on the maintenance and appearance of private properties and public roads and facilities as the bases for their ratings. There was wide variation in the perceptions of the current aesthetic appearance of the area with one respondent describing it as an intertwined “mishmash” of both the well maintained and litter free and neighborhood eyesores.

- **Is or are there one or more location(s) that you would consider gateway(s) to the community (entry points that identify the neighborhood or area to residents and others who pass by)? If so, do you like the impression of the community given there? If not, how could the community’s impression become improved?**

Respondents typically responded with gateways to their particular neighborhood within the planning area rather than to the area-as-a-whole. Most mentioned intersections of neighborhood collector streets with the major arterial roadways, including Livingston Avenue and James and Hamilton roads. The general sense was that gateways can be improved with new or improved signage, an arch, attractive and well-maintained vegetation, a covered bridge, etc.

- **Does your organization typically get involved in discussions about zoning issues? If yes, are there any particular issues that are most common?**

Most said that their organization does not deal with zoning issues or does so very rarely. Where there was zoning involvement, issues mentioned were the proposed layout and design of buildings and parking, truck parking on neighborhood roadways, bars, the interplay of residential and commercial uses, traffic generation, and half-way houses.

- **Are there any particular needs (or things missing) that you can identify for your neighborhood or area? If so, what are they?**

Some felt that the neighborhood was generally “complete” and focused more on the rejuvenation of what’s already there. Others felt that a nearby supermarket, specialty stores, mailboxes, traffic management tools, signs warning about littering, and green spaces were lacking and needed. Resident participation in civic matters was also mentioned.

- **Are there any particular places in your neighborhood or area where one or more existing properties cause(s) problems for its neighbors? What is the nature of these problems?**

Scattered vacant/abandoned/foreclosed homes and those with absentee landlords were mentioned and emphasized by nearly all respondents. Nearby apartment complexes, fast food restaurants, and the intersection of Livingston Avenue and Hamilton Road (especially the northwest corner) were also discussed as problem sites.

- **Do you feel that there is a wide variety of housing types, styles, and prices in the neighborhood or area? Is there some type of housing that is needed but currently not available in sufficient numbers (or quantity)?**

All persons answering this question said that, within their individual neighborhoods, there was not much housing variety and/or that, within the entire planning area, there was a very wide variety of housing in terms of type of unit, design and materials used, age, cost, etc. It was mentioned that many area homes are ranch styles with or without basements; with none or one- or two- car garages; and built of varying materials (brick, stone, wood, stucco, etc.).

TRANSPORTATION

- **How easy is it for a person driving a car to get around your neighborhood or area and to get to other areas of town? Can you think of any particular problem areas? Why are they problem areas? What would fix the problems?**

Most responded very positively to this question, often citing the number of major roads and freeways and proximity to Port Columbus, downtown, and regional shopping centers. One respondent felt that a private automobile is a necessity for area residents. The problem intersections mentioned earlier were emphasized here too. Potholes, parallel parking reducing sight distances near intersections, and the timing of traffic signals creating a backup onto narrow neighborhood streets were mentioned as problems that need to be addressed as well. School starting and stopping times were seen as causing congestion on small local roadways within neighborhoods.

Bus service by the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) was perceived either as very convenient by those who use it or as not very safe by some who don't.

- **Do you believe that the roadways of your neighborhood or area are currently safe for children or elderly persons? Are there enough sidewalks in the necessary locations?**

Sidewalks were perceived by some as plentiful but by others as lacking. Roadway shoulders along Livingston Avenue just east of Walnut Ridge High School were stressed as major pedestrian hazards for students and others walking along that section. Also mentioned was the destruction of sidewalks (and other infrastructure) caused by the roots of large, mature trees. Plentiful truck traffic and interruptions in sidewalk continuity were also mentioned as hazards as well.

The problem of persons (especially youngsters) walking or standing in the middle of streets and blocking traffic (rather than on the sidewalks or lawns) was mentioned numerous times.

Some respondents questioned why sidewalks should be added when they are often not used where currently available. Not all neighborhoods want sidewalks.

The street lights recently installed in some areas were seen as a big plus for pedestrians.

- **How easy is it for a person walking or riding a bicycle to get around your neighborhood or area and to get to other areas of town? Can you think of any particular problem areas? Do you personally know people who primarily walk or ride a bicycle on a regular basis, rather than drive a car? Do you see many people walking or cycling in the community?**

Some, mostly older, neighborhoods were seen as safe for walking while some others, further east, were perceived as the domain exclusively of the automobile.

Cycling was perceived by most respondents as a recreational activity rather than as a means of daily transportation. For example, no one knew of a nearby resident who biked to work or to run errands, etc. Children were said to bike in some areas, but on the major roadways, cycling was seen as very risky due to the lack of bike route signage and bike lanes, as well as the speeds and hostility of motorists. Generally, cycling was seen as more of an activity of the past, but as gasoline prices are rising, more cycling is being observed lately.

Residents appreciate the availability of bike paths (for use only during the daytime) and would like to see more. Some bike for recreation directly to the bike paths rather than circulate in the neighborhood among the cars, trucks, and buses.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES

- **Do you feel that your neighborhood or area is well served by public recreation facilities and parks? Why or why not? Where do people in your neighborhood or area usually go for recreation?**

A number of facilities were mentioned as strong assets to the area, including Big Walnut Park and scattered smaller parks and playgrounds, the two recreation centers, and the Jewish Community Center (JCC). But some desire more playgrounds, renovation of the Far East Recreation Center making it more attractive and safe, a year-round swimming pool, better maintenance of existing parks, and demolition of Pinecrest School leaving additional green space for the neighborhood.

Respondents noted that some, especially older, residents go to Whitehall recreation facilities, Franklin Park and Conservatory, and/or various Metro Parks rather than to Big Walnut Park because the preferred locations are perceived as superior and safer. Some older residents are said to drive to Reynoldsburg in order to walk for exercise.

- **How important are area streams and rivers to the people in your neighborhood or area? If someone wanted to relax next to a waterway, where would he or she go? Do you believe the person would likely enjoy the experience?**

With the exception of the dog park along Big Walnut Creek, nobody saw the streams as particularly important in the daily lives of residents. Bike paths along the streams were perceived as dangerous (especially at night), in need of better lighting, etc. There reportedly is also no particular area by the streams designated for passive relaxation and access is limited due to steep grades in some locations.

Bliss Run is said to be used by some for fishing, but that situation appears awkward and inappropriate because the waterway is surrounded by private, residential properties. Storm sewer improvements have reduced the amount of litter there in recent years.

Two additional suggestions were the dredging of Big Walnut Creek and the placement of small signs identifying the many types of trees along its adjacent path (as had existed in the past).

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- **How often do new businesses open in your neighborhood or area? Do they typically stay in business for a long period? Why do you believe that is so?**

Small businesses generally were seen as remaining for a long period of time, and when they do close or move, they are replaced rather quickly. So, there are not many vacant storefronts.

One respondent felt that the business climate along Livingston Avenue west of James Road is better than it is to the east. Another regretted that black-owned businesses are not sufficiently supported by the community (which is nearly 50% comprised of residents of African American descent). The strip center on the north side of Livingston Avenue just west of I-270 was said to have been vibrant at one time, but now lacks activity.

Many felt that, to be successful, the area needs a pleasing, cohesive appearance for its shopping venues. However, according to some, the unfortunate and widely-publicized murder of a shop owner on Hamilton Road not long ago has become an impediment to area business development.

- **Do you feel that the current mix of businesses in the neighborhood or area adequately serves the needs of community residents? Why or why not?**

Interviewees, for the most part, felt either that the current business mix adequately serves the area or that there were just a few retail options missing. Many people miss the Big Bear supermarket that closed sometime back and desire a new small- to medium-sized supermarket in closer proximity to their homes. According to some, stores that serve the daily needs of residents are lacking in the area. For example, a full-service hardware store, a dry cleaner, more restaurants, another bakery, and new “mom and pop” businesses are desired.

Something like the North Market, giving the area a unique, unifying identity, would be an improvement according to one resident. “Big box” stores (except for a new supermarket), however, are not perceived as particularly welcomed in the area.

- **Are there sufficient employment opportunities in your neighborhood/area for residents? If not, what would be the kinds of employers that people would support?**

Most of those persons not yet retired, were said to work outside the area as it is largely residential and roadways and public transit service, generally, are sufficient to get residents to and from nearby job sites. But for those who desire to work within the area, more “step up” and living wage jobs are perceived as necessary. Currently, most area jobs are at the entry level, and therefore low paying, in retail or fast food establishments. More office/professional, social service, education, and manufacturing jobs were seen as desirable.

A mixed-use community center with employment, recreation, residential, and other uses on the Livingston Court shopping center site (on the south side of Livingston Avenue just west of Courtright Road), according to one respondent, would be beneficial -- especially for young and elderly persons. There are many individuals and couples who are retired and on fixed incomes.

- **Additional comments by interviewees:**

- A well-organized effort to plan and seek redevelop of the Livingston Court site, led by neighborhood residents, took place several years ago.
- A community center for stage performances, public meetings, etc. is needed. There should be no charge for use for public meeting purposes.
- The area’s “look” should be based on its unique history.
- A “regional” draw is needed to improve the business environment and the quality of life in the area.
- Walnut Ridge High School is well worn and needs to be renovated.
- The Far East Neighborhood Pride Community Center used to be a police substation.
- The neighborhood is becoming more multi-cultural and more young people are moving in.
- Busing and school closures are very bad for area neighborhoods.
- Foreclosures are a big problem, but the respondent’s neighborhood organization helps to maintain vacated homes.
- Basement flooding is less of a problem now that basement tiles have been added.
- The respondent would have moved from the city of Columbus long ago but for the desires of his or her spouse, who wishes to remain.

The city very much appreciates the time and contributions of the following interviewees:

Mr. John Adamonis, Willis Park Civic Association and Blockwatch

Ms. Quay Barnes, Berwyn East Civic Association

Mr. Dick Batts, Shady Lane Neighborhood Association

Ms. Rita Batts, Shady Lane Neighborhood Association

Ms. Elizabeth Beeson, Elizabeth Avenue Blockwatch

Mr. Bruce Black, Berwick Civic Association

Mr. Scott Hurlburt, Leawood (Gardens)–Walnut Ridge Neighborhood Association

Mr. Jim Kern, Leawood (Gardens)-Walnut Ridge Neighborhood Association

Mr. John Medert, I-on-U Blockwatch

Mr. Ron Nichols, Pine Hills Civic Association

Ms. Sheryl Owens, Berwyn West Civic Association and the Mid-East Area Communities Collaborative (MACC)

Ms. Sharon Ware, Thunderbird Acres Neighborhood Association